



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

REGION 8
999 18TH STREET - SUITE 300
DENVER, CO 80202-2466
Phone 800-227-8917
<http://www.epa.gov/region08>

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March 8, 2006

Ref: 8EPR-SR

K.W. Maki, Superintendent
Libby Public School System
724 Louisiana Avenue
Libby, MT 59923

Dear Mr. Maki,

In 2005, the University of Montana collected bark samples from trees at several locations: the former vermiculite mine; along Rainy Creek Road (the mine access road); locations in the town of Libby; and along the railroad line approximately 7 miles west of Libby. The University analyzed the tree bark samples to determine if they contain asbestos. The results show that bark samples collected from trees close to the mine (530 million asbestos fibers per gram of tree bark) had the highest level of asbestos, while samples collected farther away from the mine had much lower concentrations of asbestos. This is collectively true of the two samples taken from Libby schools; the Libby Middle School track tree sample showed 0.13 million fibers of asbestos per gram of tree bark while the Asa Wood Elementary School tree sample had no detectable levels of asbestos fibers.

Although EPA didn't conduct or fund the University of Montana's research, we think the results are important. EPA recognizes that local workers and residents, students and parents will want to know more about the varying levels of asbestos in tree bark. EPA is concerned about possible health risks and will be exploring the potential exposures to area residents or workers associated with cutting these trees, burning the wood, or from general disturbance of trees that are contaminated. EPA will carry out these studies as part of the upcoming investigation of the mine. That investigation is currently in the planning phase.

Asbestos fibers present a health risk when they are released into the air and inhaled. EPA has not investigated what potential exposures occur when asbestos fibers that are embedded in tree bark are disturbed and released into the air. Until EPA learns more about the potential exposures and risks associated with disturbing trees that are

contaminated with asbestos, we recommend that these trees be left alone. EPA is also interested in the potential risks associated with cutting and burning firewood, and until we know more we will continue to restrict public access to a large area of Rainy Creek Road (currently closed) and warn against timber harvesting in the general vicinity of the mine and Rainy Creek Road. We also recommend that wood used for home heating be collected from sources as far away from the vermiculite mine as possible.

EPA will continue communicate with the University of Montana researchers, Libby Schools and the local community on this issue. If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact myself at 303-312-6137, or the EPA Information Center at 406-293-6194.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peggy Churchill".

Peggy Churchill
Remedial Project Manager